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U.S. motives seem as uncomplicated as Mr. Nixon said they were. One fourth of the world's population lives in China. It would obviously be impossible to achieve peace, or even a reasonable forum for peace, without China. It is a member of the nuclear club and so far has been a rather erratic member.

Beyond that is the fact that China may well hold the key to peace in Southeast Asia. As we support Saigon, Peking supports Hanoi. Again, no agreement disregarding China's real or proper role in Southeast Asia could have much chance of

it must first import. To build up agriculture, fertilizer must be imported. To increase oil production, steel pipes must be bought.

But the main point, above all, is peace. Though neither Peking nor Washington can settle the civil war in South Vietnam, they are the ones who can bring at least a tolerable measure of stability to Southeast Asia.

By agreeing to the meeting, Premier Chou En-lai and President Nixon have recognized their mutual dependence. It is a gigantic step in the right direction.

The Right to Know vs. Rubies

THE WORD from Boston is that the Justice Department is trying to get an indictment against Neil Sheehan, the New York Times reporter who first wrote the story of the Pentagon papers. The charge being sought is that Sheehan knowingly transported stolen property across state lines.

There may be a technical point of law involved, but in equity and intent this is blatant nonsense.

This is not to say that Sheehan or any other newspaperman is immune from prosecution for violating the law. As Tom Winship, editor of the Boston Globe, said when his newspaper published the Pentagon papers, he was prepared to bear the consequences, whatever they might be. This was the same position taken by civil rights leaders in the South who knowingly broke state laws. They were willing to go to jail to demonstrate to the nation that the state laws were in violation of the Constitution.

To get a conviction against Sheehan, Justice is going to have to prove first that a crime was committed, and then that Sheehan did it. Assuming that Sheehan did what he is suspected of doing, Justice is still going to have trouble proving a crime.

Were the documents stolen? We don't know. They were certainly copied, but that's different. Documents aren't like a ruby necklace, nor was copying them like infringing on a copyright, which denies to its owner something of value.

A theft implies a victim. Who was the victim? The answer is that there wasn't any.

The papers were the result of work done

at government expense. The papers belong to the people. And what Sheehan did was not take the papers from the people, but the precise opposite. He and his presumed accomplices took copies of the papers from those who were hiding them from the people and delivered them to their rightful owners.

If anyone could be said to own them more than anyone else, it might be Robert McNamara, who commissioned them while secretary of Defense. Mr. McNamara is on record that the papers should have been given to the public long before.

It is interesting to note that Mr. Sheehan is apparently not to be charged with violating national security, which was the first reaction from the Nixon administration. The reason is simple: Experts from Dean Rusk, secretary of State at the time, on down say that no security was violated.

To argue that Mr. Sheehan committed no crime and violated no security in this case is not to provide the press with an absolute blanket of privilege. We recognize the necessity for some government secrecy and we recognize the dangers to security. On the whole, the media's record is exemplary. It is far better, for example, than the record of government officials who pepper their memoirs with classified material to justify their stewardship.

If anything, this is the issue which Sheehan has raised. The people have the right to know the people's business, not just that part of it some bureaucrat wants them to know. With common sense, publication of the papers will lead to sensible use, rather than abuse, of classification codes. This in turn will better serve the public interest.